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# but are you listening?

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he ability to understand is the first requirement for effective communication. Understanding is not the only component needed to build a meaningful communication network but it certainly is the key. Without it there can be no worthwhile exchange of opinions.

This need for effective communication has never been more essential than it is today, as Canadian industry and commerce face the ever-increasing social and economic problems of automation and technological change.

Labour and management are jointly faced with the massive ramifications of these problems, yet they will not be able to find equitable solutions unless they improve their inter-communication.

Unlike the relatively simple task of developing communication within their own groups, labour and management have an added challenge in their mutual search for answers—that of developing worthwhile dialogue between two groups that have been traditionally opposed. This is where union-management consultation committees have proven their worth.

Designed specifically as a communication vehicle to bring union and management representatives together, the voluntary consultation committee can help solve mutual problems.

But bringing both parties together is not in itself the answer. Each must then learn to communicate effectively with the other.

Prof. C. Roy Brookbank of Dalhousie University in Halifax points out that one of the worst faults in attempting communication is that "we hear but we don't really listen."

He notes that most people relate conversation to their personal thoughts and

feelings rather than to the thoughts and feelings of the person who is speaking. They tend to interpret others' opinions in the light of their own experiences.

Looking at this interpretation problem as it relates specifically to labour and management, Prof. Brookbank states "the behaviour of people is not governed by facts but rather the interpretation of facts. Facts or statistical information placed in the centre . . . of the table . . . can have two different interpretations—that of labour and that of management. Each side acts on the basis of its own reality."

If this statement is true, can labour and management ever learn to understand each other? Won't they perpetually interpret?

Not so, says Prof. Brookbank. If they really want to understand each other, if they truly realize how vital it is to develop effective inter-communication, they can overcome this tendency to interpret.

Listening carefully is the key. The greatest fault of all would-be listeners is that they are not really listening. They are forming counter statements in their own minds. They assume they know what the other person is saying.

The best example can be found in the ritual greeting "Hello there. How are you?"

If you answer "I'm feeling terrible" you are liable to hear in return "That's good."

The person greeting you *expected* you to say "Fine" so even though you said you were dying, he has heard you say that you are well. He assumed. He interpreted. He heard you but he was not listening.

To counteract this tendency, to be sure of listening attentively, there is one simple formula to follow. When the other person has finished speaking, try repeating the gist of his conversation. The dialogue might start something like this: "Now, if I understand

you correctly, you have, in essence, said..."

His reaction will immediately indicate whether you were really listening or whether you were interpreting his statement.

If you have listened well you will have accomplished that first all-important step in effective communication—learning how to understand what is being said. When this happens a major stumbling block to problem-solving has been removed.

Now, when each side expresses an opinion, or facts are laid on the table, it is possible for both labour and management to view—and discuss—them in a more understanding manner.

It should be stressed, though, that learning to understand does not mean giving in. It does mean knowing exactly what the other is saying and therefore, why he takes such a position.

Today, with so many major problem areas in Canadian industrial life—problems brought about by automation and technological change; by more complicated collective agreements covering greater spans of time; by social, economic and political pressures outside the work environment—it is increasingly imperative that labour and management develop meaningful inter-communication through joint consultation.

More than 2,600 Canadian establishments from coast-to-coast are now engaged in communication improvement. They are using the many resources available to them, through the Labour-Management Consultation Branch of the Canada Department of Labour, to build effective communication channels. They know the value of accurately understanding the other person's point of view. How about you?

... ARE YOU LISTENING?